



National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
Channel Islands National Park

The Nature Conservancy
Santa Cruz Island
California



Santa Cruz Island—Ecological and Cultural Significance

Despite its location just off the coast of Santa Barbara and Ventura—and a mere stone's throw from the suburban sprawl of Los Angeles—Santa Cruz Island is worlds away from the 21 million people who call Southern California their home.



Geography

With a land area of 96 square miles, Santa Cruz is the largest and most geographically diverse of the eight Channel Islands. Seventy-seven miles of coastline surround two parallel mountain ranges that cradle a pastoral central valley. Steep canyons slice through rugged peaks as high as 2,000 feet, and freshwater springs flow year-round. The shores of Santa Cruz Island feature giant sea caves, pristine tidepools and expansive beaches.

Unique Wildlife and Plants

For decades, scientists from around the world have traveled to Santa Cruz Island to study its unusual plants and animals. More than 1,000 species of plants and animals inhabit Santa Cruz Island's high peaks, expansive meadows, and dramatic coastline. Twelve of these species are found nowhere else in the world.

The Santa Cruz Island fox, the island scrub-jay, the harvest mouse, and the Santa Cruz Island deer mouse are all endemic to Santa Cruz Island, meaning they exist nowhere else in the world. The diminutive island fox, the island's top predator for thousands of years, was recently added to the federal endangered species list following a precipitous population decline. These animals share the island with various bats, snakes, salamanders, pacific tree frogs, and 220 species of birds. Additionally, more than 680 species of plants occur on Santa Cruz Island, including nine plants currently listed as federally threatened or endangered species.

Santa Cruz Island is of special significance to biologists for its diversity of habitats as well as its endemic species. The island houses the University of California's largest Natural Reserve System site—a field laboratory for biological, cultural, and geological research. Because the island also serves as critical habitat for many native California plants, visitors to the island can get a sense of how the California landscape appeared hundreds of years ago. The habitat for many of these species on the mainland has diminished significantly.

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Over 10,000 Years of Human History

In addition to its unique flora and fauna, the Channel Islands contain a rich archaeological record of the Chumash people. The island contains more than 3,000 archaeological sites, with evidence of Native Americans dating back more than 10,000 years. Ninety percent of the island is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Artifacts from sites, such as its eleven Chumash villages, provide windows into early cultures, and offer valuable insight into how people adapted to the island environment.

An Island Ecosystem at Risk

The same isolation that has protected archaeological sites and promoted the evolution of new species on the Channel Islands also makes the island's wildlife quite vulnerable. Island plants and animals have not evolved in the presence of many mainland species, and consequently may not be equipped to handle the sudden introduction of a new predator, disease, or habitat disturbance.

Non-native species introduced to the Channel Islands throughout the past 200 years have caused extensive damage to terrain and wildlife. Mainland species—such as pigs—have catastrophic effects on native plants and animals and can lead to rapid extinctions of island species. Introduced species can wreak havoc on cultural sites, exposing ground previously protected by layers of soil and vegetation, uprooting and destroying archaeological sites.

Without immediate action to reverse the tide of degradation caused by non-native species, the island's rare biological and archaeological resources are in danger of being lost forever.

Twelve species of plants and animals on Santa Cruz Island are found nowhere else in the world.

Santa Cruz Island fox
Santa Cruz Island deer mouse
Island rockcress
Island scrub-jay
McMinn's manzanita
Santa Cruz Island manzanita
Santa Cruz Island silver lotus
Santa Cruz Island gooseberry
Santa Cruz Island lacepod
Santa Cruz Island bushmallow
Santa Cruz Island live-forever
Santa Cruz Island monkeyflower

